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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS IN ETHIOPIA; POSSIBLE CAUSES OF CONFLICTS

REF: 2008 ADDIS 3230

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Yamamoto. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

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11. (C) Ethiopia has enjoyed a long history of religious tolerance. In the past year, however, tensions have risen somewhat among Muslims and Orthodox Christians, the two largest religious groups in Ethiopia. Although it is likely that the recent conflicts are isolated incidents and are not cause for immediate concern, the attitudes and outlooks of certain groups are worth noting. Orthodox Christian leaders openly exhibit tolerance of Muslims, but there are undertones of entitlement as they are "the oldest Church in Africa," had been the state religion until 1974, and feel threatened by recent acts by Muslims which they see as provocative. Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) leaders blame the recent religious conflict on opposition parties and Wahhabis who they argue are using religion "for political means," and are trying to exclude Wahhabis from the Council. The Special Assistant to the Minister of Federal Affairs believes that recent religious conflicts were caused by "messengers" sent by organized national and international networks to incite violence, but could not say whether such networks were allied around religion, ideology, ethnicity, or some other social dynamic. The Government has taken several measures to address rising religious tensions and to avoid future conflict, including establishing regional forums to raise awareness and calling upon religious leaders and followers to reveal those attempting to incite religious conflicts. End summary.

Orthodox Tolerant but Proud

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12. (C) Head of Foreign Relations of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) Abune Gerima told PolOff that recently there have been several instances of Muslims entering empty church compounds and shouting "God is great" in Arabic. He considers this to be blasphemy, and commented that "five to ten years ago a Muslim would not have dared to even touch the walls of a church compound." The Abune (Bishop) said that according to Ethiopian culture, Muslims don't come near churches unless there is a funeral there, and Christians don't go near mosques. The leadership of the EOC meets regularly with leaders from the EIASC at the national level to discuss current dynamics. The Abune said that the Orthodox leadership is worried about the rising number of extremists (from both religions) and provocative acts. In his meeting with PolOff, the Abune became visibly upset about what the EOC perceived as Muslim "provocative acts" and said

that they are "confronting the oldest Church in Africa" and threatening Christianity. He said that he encourages his followers to be tolerant of other religions but to "protect the Church."

#### Possible Causes of Recent Conflicts

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13. (C) In the past year there have been some isolated incidents of religious conflict in Ethiopia, and interlocutors offer several different explanations as to the causes. Vice-President of the EIASC Mohammed Ibrahim Hassan said he believes that the conflicts are a manifestation of "political manipulation of religion" and the growing influence of Wahhabists. He blames opposition parties and Wahhabists for using religion "for political means" to mobilize the masses. Mohammed said he does not believe that religious leaders would incite violence because they have benefited from maintaining a peaceful co-existence for over 1,000 years. He argues that since the Wahhabis cannot find support within the population (because of the long history of Sufism), they have decided to partner with "certain opposition parties" in order to gain political power. Because the EIASC feels that Wahhabism is a serious threat to the stability of Ethiopia and the region, the Council has decided not to allow Wahhabis to be elected to the Council. In March 2009, the EIASC banned Islamic meetings and activities without permission from the Council, and they also closely monitor Imams in the country. At an April 6 lunch, the Mufti of Ethiopia told the Ambassador that the EIASC does not consider Wahhabis to be genuine Muslims, but rather

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extremists attempting to hijack the religion.

14. (C) The Ministry of Federal Affairs handles internal conflicts, including religious conflicts, but the Government is reassessing whether this responsibility should remain in this Ministry. According to the Special Assistant to the Minister of Federal Affairs Meressa Reda, some recent religious conflicts were caused by "messengers" from organized national and international networks sent expressly to incite violence. Meressa reported that the Government is actively forming close relationships with religious leaders at the national and local levels to stop the spread of extremism, and has called upon religious leaders and followers to reveal those attempting to incite religious conflicts. Also, he said that the Government has created regional forums led by regional Administrative and Security Bureaus and police commissioners to create awareness about religious tolerance. In late April, Federal Affairs Minister Dr. Shiferaw Teklemariam announced that various awareness-raising programs would be held in the coming three months, and that the Government would take the necessary measures on issues related to administrative gaps that could aggravate the emerging problems.

15. (U) In parallel to this, the Mission's Public Affairs Section is launching "Inter-Faith Councils" in Bahir Dar and Jimma this spring. Composed of Orthodox, Muslim, and Protestant religious leaders in each town, the Councils will seek to bring the spirit of inter-faith cooperation and mutual respect found at the national level to the local level. With a strong focus on cooperation to address social issues with the support of the local government, these Councils will not deal with "ecumenical understanding," but instead try to build constructive, inter-personal relationships between faith leaders around cooperation on issues of mutual concern. Should this pilot project prove effective, Mission hopes to expand it to more cities in the coming fiscal year.

#### Wahhabi and OLF Presence Spreading in Bale Region

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16. (C) Former Editor-in-Chief of the now defunct Al-Nejash

newspaper Awel Kedir (protect) said that there is a large Wahhabi Muslim presence in the Bale region. However, he noted that the large Sufi Muslim presence was strong, and that the Wahhabis are having difficulty gaining power (reftel). Awel added that the local authorities are "serious about watching the Wahhabis." Awel also reported that there is an increasing Oromo Liberation Front (OLF) presence in the Bale region because of growing dissatisfaction with the Government, and the political situation is very tense. The Government is reportedly trying to convert OLF members to Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF-ruling party) members by offering money, jobs, and property (reftel).

Comment

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17. (C) Ethiopia has a long history of religious tolerance, and for the most part religious groups continue to co-exist peacefully. Much of the increase in prominent conflicts between religious groups observed in Ethiopia over the past year is likely due to the increase of drought and poverty-induced competition over scarce resources between communities that are divided along religious lines as well as broader media coverage which brings such conflicts to light. Still, the provocations by small-but-growing religious extremists - both Christian and Muslim - are not insignificant factors in sparking conflict. We have not seen credible evidence to support the claims by some political groups, either ruling or opposition, instigating inter-religious tension for political gain. Recent highly-publicized tensions between Muslims and Christians and a growing Wahhabi influence, however, have caused the Government enough concern to intervene actively to promote interreligious tolerance and crack down on provocations. Because Ethiopians of all religions tend to be very proud and devout, religion could have the potential to polarize the population in the face of intentional provocations. The proactive measures the Government has taken to calm religious tensions and prevent future conflict are a positive development. Still, certain segments of the population that

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are extremely poor do risk falling under the sway of Wahhabi or other extremist ideologies. Post will continue to monitor closely religious dynamics.  
YAMAMOTO